Huxford, G. (2018). Review: Lizzie Oliver. Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway: Narratives of History and Memory. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. *Journal of British Studies*, *57*(4), 906-908. https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2018.162

Lizzie Oliver. *Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway: Narratives of History and Memory*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. 169. $114 (cloth).

The experiences of Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) are no longer "forgotten" in the way they once were. In 2013, Richard Flanagan's prize-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and the film adaptation of Eric Lomax's memoir *The Railway Man* highlighted the arduous physical demands of building of the Thailand-Burma railway, as well as FEPOWs' traumatic memories, camaraderie, and sheer ingenuity. In the emerging field of prisoner of war studies, too, innovative research by Meg Parkes on rudimentary medical treatment in FEPOW camps and by Clare Makepeace on FEPOW veteran communities has uncovered even more about the physical and emotional worlds of captivity. In short, prisoners of war are no longer simply the preserve of military historians: their experiences expose deeper currents in British social and economic history and even global history.

In this small and stylishly written book, Lizzie Oliver highlights a further aspect to FEPOW history that both illuminates and adds nuance to histories of the Second World War and postwar Britain. Her book draws our attention to the "Other Railway" that British FEPOWs helped to build, one that has attracted few British history scholars: the Sumatra Railway. This railway, built from 1944 to aid the Japanese war effort and facilitate access to the island's natural resources, was built by just over one thousand British and Commonwealth POWs, alongside almost four thousand Dutch POWs. Whilst British POWs were the numerically smaller group, Oliver sketches both their contribution to the construction of the railway and, in more detail, their distinctive artistic, written, mnemonic, and commemorative responses to captivity both during and after the war. The book is underpinned by a thorough knowledge of many of the men themselves, purposefully beginning with a nominal roll, which reminds the reader that individual stories sit at the heart of this astonishing case study.

Oliver's monograph begins with a short introduction, followed by a short but detailed contextual chapter on the Sumatra Railway. It offers a detailed topography and overview of the camps and notes that although some POWs were captured in Sumatra itself, following their flight from Singapore, others were forcibly transported to the island aboard so-called Hell Ships. These ships

included the *Van Waerwijk* and the *Junyo Maru*, both of which were subsequently sunk by British submarines in 1944, with the loss of six thousand lives. Britain's longer-term social and political connections with Southeast Asia are perhaps under-explored in this chapter, but it nevertheless provides a useful overview to a context often overlooked by FEPOW and Second World War historians. The remainder of the book focuses on four key elements of the cultural life of FEPOWs in Sumatra: life-writing, linguistic codes and communities, the role of prisoner bodies, and finally the aftermath and "postmemory" of FEPOWs. These chapters are driven by close reading of particular texts produced by FEPOWs, making particular use of the Imperial War Museum's Sumatra and wider prisoner of war collections. Oliver outlines a typology of POW life-writing, including "mini memoirs" and poetry scrawled on the limited supply of paper. But Oliver uncovers more unusual forms of life-writing too, including the fascinating practice of list-making in POW camps, where recalling recipes or reciting life goals held an emotional significance (with recipes even becoming "pin ups" on hut walls). In all these cases, Oliver offers a deep analysis of the process of writing itself and the challenges that befell writers during and after captivity. Though the book concentrates on the small case study of FEPOWs in Sumatra, it nevertheless draws repeated parallels with other forms of writing in captivity and looks to related scholarship, such as work on slave narratives. In chapter 4, Oliver also builds on exciting recent research into the medical history of FEPOW captivity, looking in particular depth at the literal and symbolic significance of the FEPOW body. Oliver notes how skin was a site of particular pain for FEPOWs in Sumatra, but also how it became a "parchment" in later years for family members to "read" and consider the impact of captivity on the body. In this way, Oliver and others show that we must never see life-writing as simply a liberating, wholly voluntary written exercise, produced in a period of quiet contemplation.

The most original contributions of this short book come in the third and final chapters. In chapter 3, Oliver explores FEPOW language in more depth and advances a new theory of "Prisoner of War discourse": the idea that prisoners communicated not simply in their own language, but that the transnational setting of the POW camp led them to speak in a mélange of various languages, expressions, and communicative codes. This "discourse" was unique to particular POW communities. The word *kongsies*, for example, was used to indicate the small support group of comrades who

would look out for each other. This term permeates both wartime and post-war writing, with veterans' groups providing each other with similar support in the long years after 1945.

But it is in the final chapter of *Prisoners of the Sumatra Railway* that Oliver poses perhaps the most thought-provoking questions for British Studies scholars. This chapter traces the aftermath of captivity and how family members and subsequent generations were themselves deeply imbued with this history, with Oliver making use of Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." The book itself might even be seen as part of that post-memory: it is book-ended by a powerful autobiographical narrative, as Oliver uses the preface and epilogue to explore her own relationship with FEPOWs. Oliver also acknowledges the research support offered by the Children of Far East Prisoners of War (COFEPOWs), a thriving online community who have conducted meticulous historical and genealogical research on the Sumatra Railway and other FEPOW settings. As David Reynolds has noted, the British memory of the Second World War continues to mutate, and Oliver's book uncovers—and even represents—the evolving place of military captivity within this memory. This fascinating case study will interest both memory studies scholars and historians researching Britain's relationship with its wartime past, as well as those exploring prisoner of war history and the social history of warfare.

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